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Dems, GOP live in 2 different language worlds

By LARS ERIK NELSON

CHALLENGED yesterday to point to an acquaintance among America's great mass of working people, White House counsel Edwin Meese loyally named Ronald Reagan.

"The President himself is the best example of a working man," Meese said. "He came from poor circumstances and worked his way up." Meese himself said he had done hard physical labor as an ironworker. A long time ago.

The question was provoked by a charge from Speaker of the House Thomas P. O'Neill that the President has surrounded himself with a group of rich and selfish advisers and that he and they have no contact with the working people of America and no understanding of their problems. Meese, naturally, looked hurt and said the accusation was untrue.

But it was clear from the appearances on two television interview programs—O'Neill on "Issues and Answers" and Meese on "Meet the Press"—that there is a vast gulf between Democrat and Republican in this country. At times yesterday O'Neill and Meese spoke different languages and were talking about two different worlds.

O'Neill charged that working class Americans—those earning less than \$20,000 a year—would receive no benefit at all from Reagan's proposed tax cut of 25% over 33 months. "It's geared for the wealthy of the nation and it's going to send inflation through the roof," O'Neill said.

Meese responded by pointing out that two thirds of the tax cut would go to the working and middle class. He defined that class as those earning between \$10,000 and \$60,000 a year. Those at the \$60,000 end of the scale will get bigger refunds. The more tax you pay, the more your tax bill is reduced. It's simple arithmetic. And presumably one third of the tax break will go to businesses and those earning over \$60,000 a year.

O'NEILL'S ACCUSATION about the President and his friends was also made 25 years ago by Harry Truman against Dwight Eisenhower. Ex-President Truman said that Eisenhower, a lower-middle-class kid from Kansas, had surrounded himself with golf-playing bankers and isolated himself from the working men, farmers and small businessmen he grew up with. It is a natural temptation. Unpleasant realities become only a memory, and the needy days of childhood—the painful recollections of dad coming home from the mill with a grimy face and empty lunch bucket—become a handy weapon to fend off the clamoring demands of today's working poor. Leonid Brezhnev, by the way,

The gentle way to define the differences between Meese and O'Neill is to say that they operate in different frames of reference. O'Neill has been around for a long time and therefore may be familiar to most Americans. But this Meese is a new and strange duck.

He was known as a tough prosecutor in California, a law-and-order man who looks a bit like John Wayne.

Law-and-order man Meese denounced leaks of government secrets to the press as akin to theft and said reporters who print leaks are like receivers of

stolen property. Fair enough. Leaks can damage the national security. But if leaks are morally repugnant to the Reagan administration, why did it hire as a top arms-control official Daniel Sullivan, who was fired by the Central Intelligence Agency for leaking secrets to opponents of the SALT-2 treaty on Capitol Hill? Why did it hire Richard Perle as an assistant secretary of defense when Perle was a universal source of leaked anti-SALT information? Why did it hire as director of politico-military affairs former reporter Richard Burt, who made a brilliant four-year career on a local newspaper as a receiver of leaked documents? It must be that different frame of reference.

FINALLY, IT IS a well-known attribute of Republicans that they are loyal to their friends. One might have thought that the Reagan team would be grateful this week to Sen. Charles Percy of Illinois, who urged them two weeks ago to withdraw the name of Dr. Ernest Lefever as assistant secretary-designate for human rights. Percy was trying to spare the President the embarrassment of an overwhelming defeat in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Quite the contrary. White House Chief of Staff James Baker said yesterday the Reagan crowd is irked at Percy. He had only praise, however, for Lefever backer Jesse Helms, a North Carolina conservative who hoisted the Reagan banner over Lefever and was urging a charge into the Valley of Death, when Lefever saved the President's neck by withdrawing. Helms is the friend of the White House; Percy's loyalty is suspect. It's just that different frame of reference.